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ABSTRACT

Judaism is, through its scholarly traditions, both inclusive and isolationist. In the Bavli Talmud the rabbis discuss whether or not the Torah, or any other sacred writing, can be translated into the languages of the "goyim" (Hebrew for nations, generally referring to nations other than Israel) and have that translation continue to retain the qualities that make the text sacred. In a statement of unlimited universality the Mishna gives only minimal assurance that translation does not interfere with sacredness. The position is one of assimilation, welcoming cross-cultural interface with the host nation. This paper considers Jewish relations with host nations, specifically suggesting that the "Halakah" (Law) leans decisively toward acculturation rather than assimilation deserves a serious revisiting by U.S. Jews. The paper provides a historical overview of Jewish immigrants' reaction to the U.S., particularly post-World War II. Considering the price for Jewish assimilation, it contends that the issue Joseph faced in Egypt was self-definition and asserts that this is the same critical question facing assimilated U.S. Jews today in light of two significant events, the Shoah and the state of Israel. The paper discusses the assimilationist discourse in relation to the Jewish discourse of social responsibility. It finds that understanding that discourse to participate in the social and political life of the U.S. culture is quite different from adopting that discourse as your own; that acculturation is understanding and contributing to the host culture while retaining the content that affords a full and complete connection with the horizons that make a person Jewish. (Contains 13 references and 10 notes.) (BT)

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RUNNING HEAD: Tikkun Olam

Tikkun Olam (Repair the World): Thoughts on the Role of Jewish Education in Teaching for Social Justice within a Normative Discourse of Self - A Question of Accommodation(s)

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Tikkun Olam (Repair the World): Thoughts on the Role of Jewish Education in Teaching for Social Justice within a Normative Discourse of Self - A Question of Accommodation(s)

A Matter of Translation?

Judaism is, through its scholarly traditions, both inclusive and isolationist. As a culture of *strangers in strange lands* the struggle for Jews, ever since Joseph first attempted assimilation in the Royal Court of Egypt, has been one of assimilation or acculturation vis-à-vis the host culture. Nothing makes this point more clearly than the rabbinic discussion from the Bavli Talmud tractate *Megillah*, 8b, 9a & 9b (Translation quoted in Levinas, 1994). Here the rabbis discuss whether or not the Torah, or any other sacred writing for that matter, can be translated into the languages of the *goyim* (Hebrew for nations and generally referring to nations other than Israel) from the original Hebrew and have that translation continue to retain the qualities that make the text sacred

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(the ability to make the hands impure[1]). In a statement of unlimited universality the *Mishna*[2] beginning on 8b reads:

> *Between the [holy] books on one hand and the* tefilin *and* mezuzot *on the other,* ***this is the only difference****: the books are written in all languages whereas the* tefilin *and* mezuzot *only in Hebrew.* (Emphasis mine)

It is clear in this passage that the starting point of the argument is an only slightly qualified assurance that translation does not interfere with sacredness. The *tefilin* and *mezuzot* are set out as exceptions to the overall ruling, a point I will return to later. This position is clearly one of assimilation, one that welcomes a cross-cultural interface with the host nation.

Not completely satisfied, a qualification is found in the *Mishna* ascribed to Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel:

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[1] Making the hands impure refers to the Jewish custom never touching sacred text with the hands. To do so renders the hands impure and requires a ritual bath (*mikvah*) to assure purity. The text is not affected if touched. The readers of Torah, for example, use a pointer, or *yad*, to insure purity of the hands.

[2] The rabbinic text redacted c. 200 C.E. The original work of the Talmud.

Even for the [holy] books, they [the masters] have only authorized [by way of another language] their being written in Greek.

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, while not in opposition to translations of Torah or other sacred texts with the exception of the *tefilin* and *mezuzot*, limits them to Greek alone as the sole authorized translation, one that will not interfere with making the hands impure. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel narrows the focus of assimilation to fit his already existing experience. The Torah had already been translated into Greek at the time of his clarification, a task supervised by and under the authority of the rabbinic sages.

So far so good. The *Mishna* sets forth a version of Judaism that is inclusive and expansionist to a point. This Judaism is one that welcomes a formal association with the host, a relationship that invites discursive exchanges and the understanding that is fixed to that exchange. It is also a Judaism that seeks to maintain itself through its most sacred texts, the written *tefilin* and *mezuzot*. This Judaism seeks to establish a discourse with the host while maintaining a self-sustaining culture that is its own. This is a Judaism that, tempered by the early Diaspora after the destruction of the second Temple, is fighting for

both survival as a people and a place within secular social and political contexts outside of the Promised Land.

There is, however, a second strain of Judaism that is contained within the commentary that follows the expansive sense of the *Mishna*. The rabbis of the *Gemara*[3] strike a very different tone, one that is constrictive and isolationist.

> *Books written in all languages, etc. [Says the Mishna]. [But we have] a teaching, a baraita [according to which] a Hebrew verse written in Aramaic and an Aramaic verse written in Hebrew and the use of Old Hebrew letters do not "make the hands impure" [i.e., they strip the text of its religious eminence] and [it is thus] as long as [the text] is not written in Assyrian [i.e., the letters of Classical Hebrew], in ink and in book form.*

The problem, according to the rabbis through an informal teaching accepted as authoritative, is that translation from Hebrew to Aramaic or from Aramaic to Hebrew has already been determined to be unacceptable; the

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[3] The rabbinic commentary on the *Mishna* redacted into the Talmud c.650 C.E.

translations do not make the hands impure, a sign certain that the text is no longer sacred. The only way for the text to remain sacred or pure is in its original form, in the original Hebrew. This thinking by the rabbis of the *Gemara* is a turning within, one that demands the isolation of Jews within a strictly Jewish framework even in the face of living as outsiders within a host culture. The isolationist posture, much like the stance of the *Mishna*, is tempered by the experience of living as strangers in a strange land as well as experience with Christian translations of the *Tanach*[4] that misinterpreted the original Hebrew text to conform closely to the Christian mythos[5].

The rabbis of the *Gemara*, after much discussion and moderation of positions far too detailed to enter into this discussion, ultimately decide on a position of a cautionary expansion by adopting the position of Rabbi Shimon ben

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[4] The Tanach is the collected canon of Jewish sacred text including Torah, the Prophets, and other writings. Sometimes referred to as the Bible, the Tanach excludes the Talmud and other sacred writings.

[5] A prime example is found in Genesis 49.1 where *be'acharet hayomim* is translated as "end of days" where a closer English translation would be "in the days to come." The passage in question is *not* a messianic prophecy, rather the intent of the verse is to contextualize Jacob's legacy for his sons understanding (Plaut, 1981).

Gamliel, the expression of the *Halakah* (Law) at the end of the extensive Talmudic argument:

> *Rav Abu said in the name of Rav Yohanan: The* Halakah *agrees with Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel's opinion.*

A cautionary expansion as the law? The position adopted by the Talmudic rabbis is one that served the Jews of the Diaspora well until the Jewish experience was confronted by the American experience. The egalitarian American experiment emerging from the Modern Project that, when linked to a Jewish migration including the poorest and least educated members of the Eastern European Jewish community, combined to mitigate for an assimilative thrust by Jews into American culture. The immigrants were Americans by choice. I am suggesting in this paper that the *Halakah* that leans decisively toward acculturation rather than assimilation deserves a serious revisiting by American Jews.

The American Jewish Experience: Establishing a Context

American Jews have spent many of the post World War II decades striving to become white people (Brodkin, 1998). The need to fit in, to be American, was reflected in Jewish education in the 1950's, '60's and '70's. The sons and

daughters of Eastern European immigrants sent their children to religious school, even while being torn between multiple discursive loyalties. Post Shoah sensibilities raised a specter of guilt for having escaped the slaughter because of the foresight of their parents and grandparents (cite). It was, after all, only because of the positive act of migration to America that these Jews escaped Hitler's wrath. American Jews also displayed a strong economic and emotional commitment to the newly independent State of Israel (Chiswick, 1999). Finally, due to success in both economic and professional worlds in America (Waxman, 1999) Jews generally found themselves more deeply committed to the American experiment than even their parents.

The assimilationist drive of American Jews was initially fueled by the patterns of Eastern European Jewish immigration during the years 1880 through 1920. During these years there was an unprecedented movement of people from Eastern and Southern Europe to the United States. The largest portion of this immigrant group, regardless of ethnic origin or religious affiliation, was made up of the poorest and least educated of Europeans. The Jews were no exception (Hertzberg, 1997). Most of Eastern European, Yiddish-speaking Jews that migrated to the United States

were unskilled workers. They were also poorly educated in both secular and religious matters. They were motivated to immigrate by unbearable poverty and virulent anti-Semitism in Russia and Poland (Waxman, 1999). They were religious by heritage and superficial affiliation but not by a deep commitment to religious practice, most not having the benefit of a profound understanding of Torah, Talmud or other Jewish learning (Brodkin, 1998; Chiswick, 1999). Furthermore, they were politically attached to a socialist ideology (Waxman, 1999). The Jewish immigration to the United States left behind their rabbis and a religious infrastructure. They also left behind the Jewish professional class that remained satisfied in Europe. The immigrants themselves were mostly ignorant of the fine distinctions made through an in depth study of Judaism. Once they arrived in America they were without the tools to engage in such a study even if they wanted. The Jewish immigrants became closely related to socialist politics in the United States. They became leaders in early 20th century union activities, organizing the garment workers of New York and motion picture projectionists among others (Brodkin, 1998).

The children of this wave of immigrants presented a far different picture than did their parents (Brodkin, 1998).

While their parents were largely uneducated their children were the full beneficiaries of the American commitment to public schooling. This first generation of American born children of immigrants took advantage of their opportunities in school. Many became professionals, medical doctors and lawyers while others became entrepreneurs building strong businesses, some on an international level. While public education was important, Jewish education, at least an in depth Jewish education was not. The generation of immigrants paid little attention to Jewish learning and education other than to pass on a celebratory connection to holidays and religious events. They were, after all, Americans by choice and Jews by heritage; choice ranked first. They were going to become a part of the very fabric of their chosen land.

There were few rabbis and even fewer of the immigrants that were well schooled in Torah and Talmud. Judaism in America became what could be called "holiday" Judaism. Shabbat candles were lit and holidays celebrated but the real social connection was to the *Landsmanschaften* or affiliations of immigrants from the same town or geographical region in Europe (Brodkin, 1998; Chiswick, 1999; Fishman, 2000). The *shul,* or synagogue, in America grew out of the institution of the *Landsmanschaften.*

Membership in any particular *shul* was often limited to members of the *Landsmanschaften* that served as its sponsor.

The first generation, the children of the immigrants, was exposed to Jewish education in a manner more closely matched to American public education than to the traditional *cheder*[6] devoted to Torah study. Jewish education in the Diaspora traditionally meant steeping oneself in the Torah, both written and oral. This meant a constant study of Torah and Talmud, becoming fluent in Hebrew and Aramaic along with Yiddish and often the language of the host country as well. First generation children attended Hebrew school only after first attending their lessons in the public school. The after school and Sunday school experience was modeled on the public school classroom standard (Brodkin, 1998). Boys were, for the most part, Bar Mitzvah and some girls were even Bat Mitzvah but that remained an uncommon occurrence. Judaism remained a religion that separated the genders in worship and religious obligations[7]. Jewish education was, however,

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[6] A school devoted to the study of Torah and sacred texts.

[7] The pattern outside the religious life for Jewish women in America was, however, quite different. Jewish immigrant women participated equally as leaders in social movements while many of their daughters along with their sons became professionals in America.

secondary to public education. The result of this pattern was that Jews were developing only a surface knowledge of their religion and their religious obligations (Brodkin, 1998; Chiswick, 1999; Waxman, 1999).

The children of immigrants began to objectify Judaism, focusing on the possessions of religious obligation by accumulating the artifacts of worship without the accompanying substance of the religious experience or required religious act (Boyarin, 1996). Synagogue building committees erected massive and elaborate structures to designed compete with the cathedrals and churches of American Christendom (Waxman, 1999). Religious schools dispensed versions of vanilla Judaism that conformed to whatever branch of Judaism families were affiliated, principally conservative or reform. Children, both male and female, attended *cheder* (Hebrew school) after school from one to three days a week. While the name, *cheder*, remained the same, the experience was definitely American and not Jewish. The breadth of Jewish education was present, it was the depth that was lacking (Brodkin, 1998).

This was an expansive, assimilationist approach to Jewish life in America. The immigrant generation arrived on American shores with no intention to return to the life of the *shtetl*. They left Europe to flee from the horrors

of *pogroms*, virulent anti-Semitic attacks on Jews in Poland and Russia that occurred with an irregular frequency. They left Europe to escape poverty, political and social repression. In the America they dreamed of they saw a land of unparalled opportunity to live free from oppression and want. They saw a land in which the sacred was translatable into new languages. Still Jews of the Diaspora, these uneducated immigrant Jews innately understood the message of the rabbis of the Mishna that began this paper: *the books are written in all languages.* In America they could be Jews, free from malicious anti-Semitism and wretched poverty. In America Jews could fit in, become *a part of* and not *apart from* the culture that would be their host. Strangers in a strange land for sure but strangers that were free to participate in the social and political affairs of the nation they would call home. For sure these were Americans by choice.

Divar Echair—Here is Another Way of Looking at It!

There is, however, a high price to pay for assimilation. In the essential Jewish story, the story of the Exodus from *Eretz Mitzriam* (Egypt) the narrative begins with the sale of Joseph, the favored son of Jacob, into Egyptian slavery by his jealous brothers. In Egypt Joseph,

in spite of great adversity and false criminal charges, rises to the political rank of viceroy, second only to Pharaoh himself. Joseph takes on an Egyptian name (*Zaphaneth-paneah*[6]), marries Asenath, the idolatrous daughter of a Poti-Phera, the Egyptian high priest of On, names his firstborn son Manasseh (*God has made me forget all my hardship and my father's household*) and his second son Ephraim (*God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering*) (Rashi, 1995). Joseph, the first Jew of the Diaspora, does everything he can to forget his origins, to become an Egyptian, to assimilate. He forgets his Hebrew given name, he learns to speak Egyptian, gives his children Egyptian names that serve to remind him of his tumultuous past, and yet, when confronted with his brothers presence in Egypt is forced to confront his Jewishness, his origins, culture, language, and heritage, head on.

The issue Joseph confronts is one of self-definition. Who am I in relation to both self and others. This is, perhaps, the same critical question facing assimilated American Jews today in light of two significant events, the Shoah and the State of Israel. Assimilated American Jews

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[6] Joseph's Egyptian name means "decipherer of the cryptic" (Rashi, 1995).

must, in some form or another, confront American concepts of self that have their roots in a hegemonic Christian discourse, a discourse that is foreign to Jewish sensibilities and traditional thinking. American concepts of self can be traced to concepts of competitiveness within an unforgiving social structure[9]. The American discourse is one of individual achievement and self-reliance that has roots in the harshness of Calvinist doctrine. The concept of self, whether competitive or communal, is a function of a practical discourse in which members of the normative discourse community are not willing to define themselves in counterfactual ways (Benhabib, 1992). It is precisely the counterfactual that defines a Jewish understanding of self. The American discourse is formed and ultimately shaped by Christian hegemony, a discourse that, while claiming its roots in Jewish texts is, in fact, far removed from those texts and the ethical obligations essential to a meaningful understanding of those texts.

In many ways, the discourse of self-reliance is a discourse of denial, one that does not require an

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[9] There are, of course, other ways of engaging in discussions of self, for example, notions of the self as a compliment to the very

examination of personal contributions to social conditions. It is a conversation that blames the Other as a disruptive outsider, placing the source of problems solely at the feet of the Other (Giroux, 1998). It is, simultaneously, a discourse burdened with the vocabulary of fairness and equity, a principled discourse that fails to consider underlying historical, cultural or economic roots as contributors to problematic social conditions (Fish, 1999).

This discourse of self, when applied to education, is arguably one in which the exercise of strategic authority is found in curriculum design and decisions principally in the form of state standards and outcomes (Giroux, 1998). Standards and outcomes are representative of the ethics of the hegemonic view of the "unencumbered selves" of the dominant (Christian) culture (Benhabib, 1992). Standards and outcomes represent the unexamined original position of dominance making invisible any and every alternative possibility that may challenge the dominance of those standards. In the invisibility of the Other rests the denial of cultures.

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existence of the group but we tend to not engage in this form of communal conversation.

Having taken on the robes and trappings of assimilation, American Jews have paradoxically abandoned the very horizon that defines their existence as Jews. Derrida (2002) points out that the absence of defining horizons conditions the future by failing to provide an assured path or predictable map for the future. Through the adopting of a foreign discourse, for in the final analysis that is the definition of assimilation, American Jews have lost their future. That which makes us Jews is, in the end, a commitment to memory that, in turn, requires us to envision a future that obligates a deep commitment to *Tikkun Olam*—a commitment to Repair the World (Levinas, 1994). It is in the twice-daily utterance of the pivotal prayer of Jewish life, the *Shema*, in the third paragraph where observant Jews recite, "Ani Adanai Elochem—*I am Adanai your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt out of the house of bondage in order to be God for you. I am Adanai your God*" that causes Jews to recall their own presence in bondage and the highly personal nature of the liberation from that bondage that establishes a Jewish horizon. The Jewish horizon requires the memory of Sinai and all the obligations that are incumbent upon that memory.

It is this vision or horizon that establishes the personal connection between the Torah, the invisible and unknowable God, and the ethical obligations of individual Jews to care for the stranger, the widow, and the orphan (Levinas, 1994). The Jewish discourse embedded in the memory of bondage and liberation is a discourse of community, one far different than the assimilated competitive American discourse of self that sets individual against individual and group against group in the name of progress. The Jewish discourse is one of social responsibility, recognizing the stranger in need if only because you too were once a stranger in the land of Egypt, rather than a discourse of hegemonic dominance of the Other, a prime recent example being the discourse of patriotism that pits the "good" of the West against the "evil" of Islam and Islamic terror. The Jewish discourse is one that recognizes the self as a member of a larger interdependent community that will not survive without the socially responsible acts of personal ethical contributions, the mitzvah, that are required by the very essence of the defining horizon.

The assimilationist discourse runs deep in American Jews. Jewish children continue to attend public schools, however there is a growing movement among all segments of

American Jewery to parochial education. Jewish day schools are a growing phenomenon in American cities where there are large Jewish populations. But the supplementary *cheder* and Sunday school remains the norm. At least one Rabbi complains that what is left after this meager exposure to Torah and religious obligations is a watered down, almost middle-school version of Torah.

It is difficult to manage two competing discourses without finding cause to utterly dismiss one or the other as trivial. The rabbis that raised the counter argument to assimilation that I visited at the beginning of this paper seemed to have a clear understanding of the difficulty of competing discourses. Their cautionary language affirming the difficulty of translation from one language into another (or, for that matter, from one discourse into another) remains as vital today as it was 1700 years ago. Their warning clearly argued that we cannot be what we are not; rather we must strive constantly to perfect what we are. In the end the rabbis found that argument to be persuasive, yet much too restrictive. The goal of the *Halakah* in the end is to point to the dangers of complete assimilation, to fully adopt the discourse of the host culture, any host culture, while subordinating a Jewish discourse within a strictly religious context. What the

rabbis understood, what Joseph learned, and what a large group of American Jews are coming to know, is that full assimilation amounts to a loss of horizon, a loss of direction, a loss of predictability, and a loss of future. The Shoah only serves to accentuate this point. German Jews, having fully assimilated into German culture, were nevertheless nearly exterminated along with the remainder of European Jewery. German or not, they were nonetheless Jews and, therefore, outside of the hegemony of German discursive mythology. Assimilation did not protect against the hegemony of the host culture that chose to make the Other entirely nonexistent.

In agreeing that the *Halakah* was to allow limited translation of sacred text into Greek the Talmudic rabbis anticipated the problems facing Diaspora Jews that were only made apparent in the perceived freedom of the United States with its modern affirmations of freedom, liberty, and equality/equity. Prior to the American experience, the Jewish Diaspora was to a greater or lesser extent disallowed full assimilation into the host culture. Only in the United States did the meaning of assimilation take on new connotations.

Here, where religion, or shall we say religious practice, or perhaps even better the establishment of

religion, is protected by the full faith and credit of the Constitution, does the issue of assimilation take on a gravity unprecedented in Jewish history. As Derrida (2002) points out, the very notion of religion itself is a construction of Christian hegemony and is not to be confused with the human urge to encounter the thing that is both one and indefinable. Religion, in the sense that its practice is protected by the Constitution, is linked to a particularly Christian hegemonic connection leading to obligations of salvation. Let me cite two particular examples of the Christian hegemony I am referring to. First, the onerous notion of Judeo-Christian religious practice or culture[10] and second, the appearance on American money of the phrase "In God we Trust."

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[10] The term Judeo-Christian, a construction of Christian religious leaders searching for a way to integrate the apparently shared origins of monotheism, is particularly onerous to Jews for their inclusion in that construction and, I suspect, Muslims for exclusion from this appeal to universal monotheism. Through the inclusion/exclusion gambit the Christian hegemonist simply ignores the Other by assuming, on the one hand, an inclusion that is unwanted/unwarranted and, on the other hand, supporting an exclusion that vilifies and demonizes the Other. All this is encompassed by the supposedly neutral label; Judeo-Christian.

Assimilation into the American hegemonic discourse is, upon careful examination, alien to traditional Jewish thought. Understanding that discourse in order to participate in the social and political life of the American culture, however, is quite different than adopting that discourse as ones own. That is the point the rabbis were making when they ruled in favor of the interpretation of Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel. The *tefilin* and *mezuzot* are only to be rendered in Hebrew while the holy text may be translated into Greek has the weight of recommending that assimilation goes too far. Acculturation on the other hand, an understanding of and a contribution to the host culture while retaining the stuff that affords a full and complete connection with the horizons that make one Jewish is not only acceptable, it is required.

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